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# THE CONDOR A MAGAZINE OF WESTERN ORNITHOLOGY.



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## A SUMMER AT FLATHEAD LAKE, MONTANA

By ARETAS A. SAUNDERS

WITH FOUR PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

THE SUMMER bird life of Flathead Lake, Montana, is already well known through the writings of Mr. P. M. Silloway in bulletins of the University of Montana and in THE CONDOR. The area, however, is a large one. Many parts of it have not yet been visited by an ornithologist, and conditions are changing as the country becomes more thickly settled, so that it is still possible to add more birds to the list or to get new facts about the species previously known.

I had the good fortune to spend the summer of 1914 at the Biological Station of the University of Montana, in the position formerly occupied by Mr. Silloway. The location of the station has been changed from its former position at the north end of Flathead Lake to a spot more centrally located on the east shore, at Yellow Bay. The country has been settled very rapidly. Many areas on the lake shore have been cleared and planted to orchards. The town of Big Fork has sprung up at the mouth of Swan River, the former site of the station, and the town of Polson at the southern end of the lake, near its outlet. It is feared that with changing conditions many of the larger and more picturesque species of birds are becoming scarce. At the same time many of the small song birds are increasing in numbers.

Bird life is very abundant at Yellow Bay, but the number of species that one may find within easy walking distance of the station is considerably less than at the old location at Big Fork. This is because there is less variety to the character of the surrounding country. The station is better equipped with boats than formerly, so that trips may be made in a short time to distant parts of the lake shore, and places not commonly visited in former years are now easy of access.

The Olive-backed Thrush (*Hylocichla ustulata swainsoni*) is by far the most abundant bird about the station. Up till late July these birds sang very frequently. Often eight different birds were heard in song at the same time. The songs were heard throughout the greater part of the day, only ceasing for a few hours at noon. This song, while pleasing at first, is of much poorer quality than the less frequent songs of other thrushes, so that in time it loses its charm and becomes decidedly monotonous. The nests of this thrush are easily found. They outnumbered all others to such an extent that I found an average of nearly three of them to one nest of any other bird.

I had not been at the station long before the first addition to the list of Flathead birds was made. This was a male Rocky Mountain Pine Grosbeak (*Pinicola enucleator montana*) that was discovered on the morning of June 27 by Dr. M. J. Elrod, Director of the Station, in the fir trees not far back of the Station building. We watched the bird for some time and easily identified it before it flew off. It is quite probable that this bird is a common summer resident of the higher mountains nearby, but what it was doing here in the Transition zone, and in the breeding season, is a puzzle. It was not seen again and probably returned to the higher mountains where it belonged.



Fig. 40. OSPREY ISLAND, FLATHEAD LAKE, MONTANA

On the same day that this bird was found, a trip was made to one of the numerous small islands near the southern end of the lake. A pair of Ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus carolinensis*) was occupying a large and conspicuous nest placed in a dead fir at one end of the island. Their presence here for a number of seasons had given this the name of Osprey Island. It is evident that the Osprey is one of the birds that is decreasing in numbers in this locality. Nests that had been occupied in former years were common about the lake shore; but this was the only occupied nest that I saw during the entire season. (See fig. 40.)

The top of Osprey Island is covered with a dense thicket of bushes, and about its edges are numerous dead fir stubs and a few live cottonwoods. The whole island is small, only a few acres in extent, but the bird life on it is abundant. Nests were numerous, and altogether I found on it, in the course of half an hour, more nests than I found in all other places about the lake put together during the entire summer. Yellow Warblers (*Dendroica aestiva aestiva*) were perhaps the most numerous, but Olive-backed Thrushes, Robins (*Planesticus migratorius propinquus*), and Catbirds (*Dumetella carolinensis*) were not far

behind in point of numbers. Tree Swallows (*Iridoprocne bicolor*) and Red-shafted Flickers (*Colaptes cafer collaris*) were nesting in the fir stubs, and several pairs of Juncos (*Junco hyemalis* subsp.?) were feeding young out of the nest. The number of nesting birds was remarkable and furnished a good example of the amount of bird life that a small area can support when it is isolated and thus protected from natural enemies.

On June 30 a party from the station visited Big Fork and Daphnia Pond at the north end of the lake. Here I was fortunate in finding three species not previously listed from Flathead Lake. The first of these was the Least Flycatcher (*Empidonax minimus*). A single individual of this species was in the cottonwood trees at the mouth of Swan River and was easily identified by the "chebec" call-note, a note which is totally different from that of other species of *Empidonax* found in this region.

I am of the opinion that the Least Flycatcher is increasing in numbers in Montana, moving westward in its range. Early records of the bird in the state



Fig. 41. A BAY IN WILD HORSE ISLAND, FLATHEAD LAKE, MONTANA

are few, but at present it is very common in cottonwood groves in many places east of the continental divide, notably at Bozeman, Livingston, Great Falls, Choteau, and probably other places. This bird appears to be the first one recorded west of the divide, but if my theory is correct it may be expected to become common in the region in the future.

The second new bird for the region found that day was the Cassin Vireo (*Lanivireo solitarius cassinii*). Two individuals were seen in the trees near Big Fork. Later I found by careful observation that this bird is a fairly common summer resident in the fir forests about the lake. The following day, July 1, I secured one at Yellow Bay for more definite identification. This bird has evidently been previously overlooked in the region, owing to the similarity of its song to that of the commoner Red-eyed Vireo.

The third new bird was the Orange-crowned Warbler (*Vermivora celata* subsp.?), an individual of which was found in song in a large area of cut-over land on the road to Daphnia Pond. This bird was found in the same place a

few years ago by Mr. Silloway and noted in an unpublished manuscript of his now in the possession of Dr. Elrod. It is another bird that is probably increasing in numbers due to the increasing areas of cut-over land.

The west shore of Flathead Lake is in general quite different in character from the east shore. The soil is evidently drier and the rainfall is probably considerably less. The forests are largely confined to slopes of east and north exposure, while the other slopes are clothed only with open grass land. These forests are composed almost entirely of yellow pine, the other trees, such as Douglas fir, western larch and Engelmann spruce, being confined to a few scattered individuals. The bird life of the two shores consequently differs

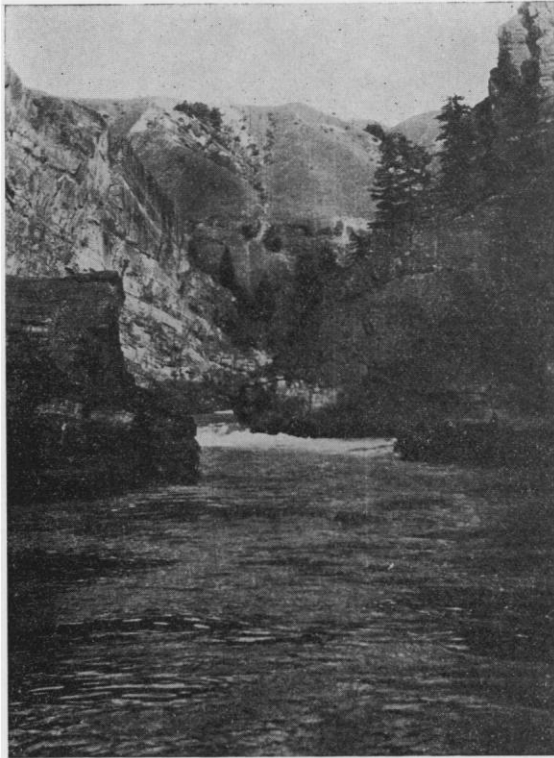


Fig. 42. CANYON OF THE PEND D'OREILLE RIVER, MONTANA; NESTING GROUND OF THE VIOLET-GREEN SWALLOW

considerably, such species as the Audubon and Townsend warblers, the Kinglets and the Olive-backed Thrush, that are common on the east shore, being almost lacking here, while in the open pine forests Western Wood Pewees are the commonest birds, and in the grass lands Western Meadowlarks and Western Vesper Sparrows are abundant, all of these species being rare or local on the east side of the lake.

These conditions are found well illustrated on Wild Horse Island, the largest island in the lake. This island is near the west shore and almost directly across the lake from Yellow Bay. Here, on July 2, two more birds new to Flathead Lake were found. The first of these was the Pygmy Nuthatch (*Sitta pygmaea pygmaea*). I observed and later secured a single bird of this species in

the pines, and Dr. Elrod saw three more on another side of the island. The other new bird was the Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*), a male of which flew low over my head as I was adjusting my camera to take some pictures from the top of a high rocky hill on the west end of the island.

The mountains of the Mission Range nearest to Yellow Bay are rather low in elevation. Their sides have been burned repeatedly by forest fires, so that down timber, brush and thickets of young lodgepole pine make climbing very difficult. A trip made to the top of one of the peaks on July 16 was rather disappointing in the number of birds found. As we ascended the mountain most of the species found about the lake shore disappeared, while few of the

characteristic mountain birds were found to take their places. Juncos became more abundant and Townsend Solitaires (*Myadestes townsendi*) were found about some rocky cliffs. The Richardson Grouse (*Dendragapus obscurus richardsoni*) was perhaps the only bird that was really common. These were mostly females with broods of half-grown young. The females flew up into the trees at our approach, watching anxiously, while the young, which though able to fly showed little fear, remained nearer the ground.

On July 23 a trip was made to Polson, and thence down the Pend d'Oreille River to a rocky canyon about six miles below the outlet of the lake. Here the character of the country was quite different from any that we had visited previously. The region had never been visited by Mr. Silloway, so I had the good fortune to add two more birds to the Flathead Lake list that are not found in other localities of the region. The first of these was the Violet-green Swallow (*Tachycineta thalassina lepida*) that was breeding in considerable numbers in hollows of the limestone cliffs of the river canyon. Many of the young birds had left the nests and were perched in the tops of dead cottonwood trees along the river bank. From these perches they sallied forth on rather uncertain wings to meet the parents as the latter came with food. Several specimens, including young of the year, were secured. With the Violet-greens I found the second new bird of the day, the Rough-winged Swallow (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*). Young of this species were also about. Two specimens secured included an adult and a young bird of the year. (See fig. 42.)

Hummingbirds are more abundant at Flathead Lake than I have found them elsewhere in Montana. Both the Rufous Hummingbird (*Selasphorus rufus*) and the Calliope Hummingbird (*Stellula calliope*) are common about the station at Yellow Bay. A nest of the latter species was found in one of the yellow pines in front of the station. A limb about six inches in diameter projected horizontally from the tree at a height of about 20 feet. On the under side of this limb was a short dead branch about an inch in diameter. The nest was saddled on this branch under the larger limb in such a way that it was protected both from the rain and from the rays of the sun. The nest was first discovered through the actions of the parent bird, which was very belligerent in protecting her home from all birds and other animals that approached too closely. A pine squirrel had ventured into the tree and the mother hummer chased it away immediately, following it a long way through the trees and darting at it first from one side and then from the other. The nest contained half-grown young when first found.

Infrequent feeding periods seem to be the rule with birds that feed by regurgitation. In this case the mother hummer fed her young in periods that averaged a little over half an hour apart. The feeding was in the usual hummingbird fashion, not differing perceptibly from the methods of the Ruby-throated and Rufous hummingbirds. The young left the nest about a week after it was found. We removed the nest later for better examination. It was a beautiful structure, built almost entirely of white cottonwood down, decorated on the outside like that of other hummingbirds with bits of green lichens.

During the first half of August I was away from Yellow Bay on a trip through the Glacier National Park. On my return, August 18, I found that the fall migration had started. Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) were much more numerous about the lake than they had been in midsummer. Soli-

tary Sandpipers (*Helodromas solitarius cinnamomeus*) were seen occasionally, and on August 23 a small flock of Pectoral Sandpipers (*Pisobia maculata*) was noted. Eared Grebes (*Colymbus nigricollis californicus*) appeared on the waters of the lake, and some of the song birds, notably the Western Tanager (*Piranga ludoviciana*), had greatly decreased in numbers.

On the last day of my stay at the station, August 25, another new bird was added to the Flathead list. A swift flew over the station building, and hovered about long enough to be identified as a *Chaetura*. I did not see it closely enough to make sure of the species, but considering the locality there is little doubt but that it was Vaux Swift (*Chaetura vauxi*). This bird has been recorded but once previously from Montana, when a bird was taken at Silver, Missoula County, June 25, 1891 (Bendire, *Life Histories of North American Birds*, vol. II, 1895, p. 183). This is also in the western part of the state. Mon-



Fig. 43. NEST AND EGGS OF THE OLIVE-BACKED THRUSH, AT FLATHEAD LAKE, MONTANA

tana records of the Chimney Swift are equally rare and only from the extreme eastern part of the state. While visiting Mr. H. P. Stanford at his taxidermist shop at Kalispell the next day, he informed me that he had also seen swifts at Somers, at the north end of Flathead Lake, but did not know what kind they were.

I obtained from Mr. Stanford several records of other birds that are new to Flathead Lake, most of which are represented in his collection of mounted birds from this region. He possesses two good specimens of the Western Grebe (*Aechmophorus occidentalis*) which he states occurs regularly on Flathead Lake in September. There are no previously published records of this bird from Montana to my knowledge. He also has a specimen of the White-winged Scoter (*Oidemia deglandi*), and stated that he has mounted for others at least three specimens of the Surf Scoter (*Oidemia perspicillata*), both species being

fall migrants on the lake. The latter species is new to the state. He possesses an excellent mounted specimen of the Trumpeter Swan (*Olor buccinator*), which occurs in this region, as recently recorded by Mr. H. K. Coale (*Auk*, xxxii, 1915, p. 87.) There seem to be no published records of the Great Gray Owl (*Scotiapterx nebulosa nebulosa*) from the state, but Mr. Stanford has a mounted bird and states that the species is not uncommon about Kalispell in winter and that he has seen it in summer.

One change should be made in the subspecies of one of the birds breeding at Flathead Lake. A male Golden-crowned Kinglet, taken at Yellow Bay, June 25, proves to be the western bird (*Regulus satrapa olivaceus*), as identified for me by Dr. L. B. Bishop. This is the first bird of this species that I have taken in the state during the breeding season, but its subspecies is the same as that of fall migrant birds taken in other parts of the state.

I have questioned above the subspecies of Junco found here. Mr. Silloway listed it as the Shufeldt Junco (*Junco hyemalis connectens*), but the A. O. U. *Check-List* includes this region in the range of the Montana Junco (*J. h. montanus*). The birds as seen in the field certainly look like the Shufeldt, but I have taken no specimens.

I have also questioned the subspecies of Orange-crowned Warbler, and believe that the subspecific identities of a number of other species should be questioned. Flathead Lake, in addition to being west of the continental divide, is in a much more humid region than any other part of Montana, being more like northern Idaho and northeastern Washington in this respect. I would not be surprised to find that the subspecies of many such birds as the Orange-crowned Warbler, Song Sparrow, Towhee, Chickadee, Horned Lark, and Red-winged Blackbird are not what they were first reported to be, but are more like those of northern Idaho.

*West Haven, Connecticut, February 16, 1915.*

## AN APPARENT HYBRID BETWEEN SPECIES OF THE GENERA *SPATULA* AND *QUERQUEDULA*

By H. S. SWARTH

WITH ONE PHOTO

(Contribution from the Museum of History, Science and Art)

THE LOS ANGELES Museum of History, Science and Art has recently received as a gift a specimen of a duck presenting certain peculiar features. The bird was given to the Museum by Mr. A. E. Jackson, who shot it December 13, 1914, on the grounds of the Crescent Gun Club, near Del Rey, Los Angeles County, California. It was sent to the Museum in the flesh, and there made into a study skin.

The general appearance of the bird is such as strongly to suggest the possibility of its being a hybrid between the Shoveller (*Spatula clypeata*) and one of the species of *Querquedula*, the Cinnamon Teal (*Q. cyanoptera*) or the Blue-winged Teal (*Q. discors*). It is a male, but in the mottled plumage of the immature, and is probably a bird of the previous spring.